

Proper 16, Year C

- Ezra, my youngest, is home this morning with a fever, likely somewhere between 101 and 103 degrees, if yesterday was any indication
- Which means I've spent a lot of time thinking about fevers over the past couple days – or really, over the past few years – as I'm sure anyone who's ever had young children can empathize with
- A lot of people think that a fever is caused by an infection in your body, of some invader – a bacteria or virus, maybe even a fungus – that somehow causes your body to do something unnatural, to get way hotter than it should
- But that's not really true – a fever is really our body's own doing – our immune system at work, raising our core body temperature to a level that is inhospitable to the reproduction of whatever bacteria or virus it is that happens to be invading
- It's a defense mechanism, in other words – not one that feels good, but one that is necessary so that we can be well, be whole again, at least eventually
- Something like a consuming fire
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- Sort of like we hear God is, in our reading from Hebrews
- “You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire...”
- And again: “for indeed our God is a consuming fire.”
- Our God is a consuming fire
- There's a comforting thought, right? I mean, fire can often be good, even life-giving... but “consuming fire” sounds a little more menacing, a little more worrisome
- The author of Hebrews is echoing a long tradition of referring to God as fire – God appearing to Moses as a burning, Moses referring to God as a fire, a jealous God, when warning the ancient Israelites not to break the covenant that they have with the Lord – and in one of the prophecies of Zechariah, where the prophet sees God striking down two thirds and promising to refine the remnant with fire
- From all of these we learn that God is a consuming fire – but also, incredibly, that we do not need to fear – that God is a consuming fire, but not intent on consuming **us**, not intent on destroying us
- Because God shows us in the burning bush that the bush is not consumed at all, but instead simply stands as a testament to the majesty and awesome power of God
- God shows us in Moses' speech that God does not consume those who are part of God's

covenant, but instead wants to burn up the idols that God's people fashion to take God's place

- In Zechariah we hear that the fire of God is not an all-consuming fire, but is actually a refiner's fire
- A refiner's fire isn't meant to burn up everything, but to heat everything up to the point that it becomes clear what is essential, what is pure metal – and what is dross, the waste or impurities in the metal that must be removed in order to make the metal stronger
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- So in addition to fevers, I've found myself thinking about a hymn, a pretty famous hymn whose author I would credit if we were at all sure of who the author actually is
- “How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord”
- It's a pretty unique hymn in that most of it isn't us singing our lines to God, but rather consists of us singing God's lines to ourselves – can't think of any other hymns like that
- But one verse, in particular, has been going through my head all week:
- “When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
- My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
- The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
- Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”
- Our God is a consuming fire – burning up the worst parts of us, refining us down to what we were always meant to be
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- But that doesn't guarantee a painless process – it doesn't guarantee that we'll enjoy it – it doesn't even guarantee that we'll enjoy the outcome
- Because when our pathway lies through fiery trials, it isn't merely the distasteful parts of our existence that God wants us to be free of
- It isn't just things that we don't like, things that we're ready to give up, that we want to move past
- Sometimes God wants us to be rid of things that we're quite attached to
- Sins and vices that we weren't quite finished with
- None other than St. Augustine himself, possibly the most influential theologian in all of Western Christianity, who famously said, (and I'm paraphrasing a bit here), “Lord, make me pure, but not yet.”
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- For a lot of people, at least some of the time, a fever may be the first indication that you're even sick
- Sometimes, if we're lucky, the fever manages to kill off the invaders before they make us very sick – before they have a chance to give us symptoms of their own, or cause serious damage to our bodies – so we don't even realize that the invaders are there, doing us harm
- So it's pretty easy to get bothered, maybe even angry, when we have a fever
- We don't like the way it makes us feel – we don't want to be sick, to feel sick
- But we forget that we already are – have been long enough for our body to respond
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- God sometimes is like that, too
- Don't get me wrong: I don't for one second mean that every time we're miserable, that God is ultimately responsible
- But sometimes, at least some of our miseries come from the pain of having to let go of something harmful, something we aren't quite finished with, but that in the long run will harm us
- Sometimes, we end up miserable because we are too close to things that aren't good for us, things that need to be burned away
- But being refined, even by fire, doesn't mean that God is angry with us – not any more than a fever means that our body hates us
- It just means that the power of God is at work in us, doing infinitely more than we can ask or imagine
- The flames shall not hurt us; God only designs
- Our dross to consume, and our gold to refine.